

HB 336 -- FIRST RESPONDER POLITICAL ACTIVITY

SPONSOR: Hinson

COMMITTEE ACTION: Voted "Do Pass" by the Committee on Elections by a vote of 10 to 2.

This bill specifies that no political subdivision of the state can prohibit any first responder from engaging in any political activity while off duty and not in uniform, from being a candidate for elected or appointed public office, or from holding the office, unless the political activity or candidacy is otherwise prohibited by state or federal law.

Currently, an employee or officer of the Kansas City Police Department is prohibited from belonging to a political party committee, being a ward committeeman or committeewoman, or making or soliciting contributions of any kind for political activity. The bill repeals these provisions.

PROPONENTS: Supporters say that the bill guarantees important First Amendment rights and allows first responders to participate in politics in the same manner as other employees. Restrictions on campaigning while on the job or in uniform will remain law. Firefighters and police should be able to run for local offices in their communities and participate in politics on their own time.

Testifying for the bill were Representative Hinson; Tony Kelly, Missouri State Council of Fire Fighters; Mitch Albert, Missouri State Fraternal Order of Police; and Brad Lemon.

OPPONENTS: Opponents say that most cities have ordinances to restrict political activity by their employees. This presents a nonpartisan appearance to the public and prevents city employees from being pressured into contributing to political campaigns. Kansas City has a long history of corruption and continues to run its firefighting and police services through the spoils system. Kansas City employs more firefighters and policemen per capita than any other municipality and their political influence is significant under current law. Removing restrictions may allow them to be coerced into campaigning, fund-raising, or contributing to campaigns, and may give them improper influence over general elections.

Testifying against the bill were Missouri Municipal League; and Woody Cozad.